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ABSTRACT

This investigation used a convergent measures design to explore the relationship of television viewing habits and preferences to experimentally emitted aggressive behavior. The catharsis argument posits that watching programs high in aggressive content provides a socially adaptive outlet for involvement with aggression. Groups of college and noncollege educated psychiatric patients and college educated normals were compared according to their television habits and their response to the dependent measure. The dependent measure used a modified Prisoner's Dilemma Game in which S was given 10 "zap" options which, if exercised, enabled S to (maladaptively) aggress against another at a cost to himself. Results lent only mixed support to the catharsis argument. Findings suggested that as a predictor and determinant of subsequent behavior, television preferences must be considered along with situational and personality variables. (Author)

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EFFECTS OF TELEVISION VIEWING IN AN EXPERIMENTAL AGGRESSION PARADIGM

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A flurry of attention has recently focused on the potential adverse behavioral effects associated with television viewing (Liebert, Neale, and Davidson, 1973). Key issues regarding the effects and value of television remain unresolved. Two general positions have emerged. One research group (Berkowitz, 1968; Bandura, 1969) claims that viewing aggression stimulates, encourages and teaches acts of aggression. The opposing viewpoint (Feshbach and Singer, 1971) contends that pictorial media may serve a cathartic function: seeing the television portrayal of aggression provides viewers with vicarious fulfillment of their own aggressive tendencies. Feshbach and Singer (1971) found support for their argument in a recent innovative project assessing the effects of viewing aggressive content on normal and incarcerated delinquents in a naturalistic setting. However, the cautious interpretations made by Feshbach and Singer of previous findings suggest that one's selection of television programs is rooted in fundamental personality variables acquired during the socialization process. Two general findings from the Feshbach and Singer project which lend credence to a catharsis position are:

a) "exposure to aggressive content in television does not lead to an increase in (actual) aggressive behavior" (p. 104); and

b) "exposure to aggressive content in television seems to reduce or control the expression of aggression in aggressive boys from relatively low socioeconomic backgrounds" (p. 128).

The central implication of the catharsis argument is that watching programs high in aggressive or violent content provides a socially acceptable, adaptive outlet for involvement with aggression. The present study

attempted to empirically assess the catharsis hypothesis by collecting divergent data from both experimental and non-laboratory sources.

METHOD

The sample was composed of 76 psychiatric patients and 38 college students, all of whom were males 18-30 years of age. S's were rated for premorbid status according to Phillips' scale (1953) (41 good and 35 poor patient S's), years of schooling, intelligence, socioeconomic status, and number of arrests. To allow more rigorous group comparisons a special effort to include 38 patients with one or more years of higher education was successful.

S's were surveyed by interview as to both their television preferences and habits. Each subject was asked to report his "five favorite" and "five most recently viewed television programs." A system of evaluating television programs, based on one devised by Feshbach and Singer (1971) was applied to determine the extent to which the person involved himself in vicarious aggression. Programs were rated according to time spent depicting violent themes and whether or not the protagonists relied upon aggressive tactics to achieve his ends. A total of 141 television programs were rated on a 3-point scale according to their emphasis on presenting content of an aggressive nature (see Table 1).

Insert Table 1 about here.

Two experimentally naive advanced psychology graduate students performed the television ratings and achieved 91% agreement.

Level of education, as the major independent variable, was incorporated into the experimental design as a potential predictor of maladaptive

aggression. Two groups were compared: those with no more than a high school education and those with one or more years of higher education. As level of education has not previously been investigated in connection with aggression and psychopathology, no precedent for comparing these groups has been entered into the aggression research literature. Level of education was determined both by self-report and college or hospital records.

The dependent measure was applied in a laboratory situation (ostensibly divorced from the television survey). Due to the nature of the topic to directly study interpersonal aggression in a laboratory setting poses serious problems. Research paradigms which rely upon deception have been faulted on several grounds (Anchor and Cross, 1974): 1) ethical considerations may be overlooked; 2) due to the highly contrived nature of the experimental tasks, in the presence of E, one can only guess as to the credibility S attributes to the situation; 3) actual aggression does not occur. Berger and Tedeschi (1969) have devised a methodology which appears to reduce some of the weaknesses characteristic of earlier aggression research. They employed a variation of the Prisoner's Dilemma Game which affords the opportunity to directly observe a behavioral response that can be unambiguously interpreted as harm-intending aggression directed toward another person. Each S played a modified version of the Prisoner's Dilemma Game and was given ten "zap" options which, if exercised, enabled S to (maladaptively) aggress against, and penalize, the other player at a cost to himself. A pre-planned strategy, similar to one he used in the Berger and Tedeschi study, was played by a confederate based upon a 50% cooperation, 50% defection schedule with each S. A complete description of the methodology, instructions, and payoff matrix is described in an earlier paper (Anchor and Cross, 1974). How-

ever, it should be noted that the focus of this study was not upon the Prisoner's Dilemma Game data; instead, the frequency with which the zap option was employed was the laboratory behavior under examination. In effect, implementation of the zap option was the experimental procedure for S to emit low cost maladaptive aggression against the other player at no gain to himself. Frequent use of the zap mechanism was regarded as an observable move on S's part to intentionally penalize the other player even though it was disadvantageous, contrary to the game's objective, and would cost S to do so. The limitations and frailties of drawing conclusions based entirely upon game playing behavior have been discussed elsewhere (Sermat, 1970). The purpose of the Prisoner's Dilemma Game was only to serve as a vehicle for creating a controlled series of experimental social interactions.

RESULTS

In view of previous evidence favoring the catharsis position, an inverse relationship between frequency of zaps and amount of high aggressive content television viewing might have been expected. Table 2 summarizes results of Pearson Product Moment Correlations applied to the total sample and the relevant subgroupings.

Insert Table 2 about here.

The correlation coefficients performed to determine the presence or absence of a linear relationship between television habits and aggressive behavior in the experimental situation were consistently negative with significance obtained only for the total sample and patients with poor premorbid status.

Because of the exploratory nature of the data regarding aggressive content in television viewing, it was decided that the most meaningful analyses would be those which compared only extreme groups. Consequently, S's who exercised the zap option (of which there were 10) six or more times were designated Highs in order to compare them to a Low group composed of those S's who employed the zap option three times or less.

Among High and Low groups for the total sample, a significant difference for zaps was obtained from a t-test for television viewing (see Table 3). Based on the television data, the Low zap group watched more

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Insert Table 3 about here.

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high aggressive content programs than the High zap group. A t-test of television viewing for the patient sample produced no differences between High and Low zap groups ($t = 1.56$, $df = 57$, ns) as did a similar comparison for High and Low zap normals ($t = 1.63$, $df = 23$, ns). Table 4 presents the significant group differences found for High and Low S's with higher education.

Insert Table 4 about here.

DISCUSSION

The results concerning the relationship between television viewing and maladaptive aggression lent only mixed support to the catharsis argument. Within the total sample, the High zap group watched significantly fewer programs which stressed aggressive themes than the Low zap group, but this difference did not apply to High and Low zap groups among patient and normal samples examined separately. Among normals and patients with

higher education, the High zap group watched fewer aggression-oriented programs than the Low zap group.

Judging from the findings, the television catharsis position appears to be entirely too simplistic to explain the several interrelated variables involved in the expression of actual aggression. There appears to be no persuasive rationale for explicating why catharsis should apply exclusively to the groups with higher education. The correlational data demonstrate consistent negative correlations between frequency of zap responses and amount of high aggressive content television viewed. However, significance was achieved only for the total sample and the poor premorbid patient group. In both instances, the correlations proved to be low.

Since the present results on the television-aggression topic are preliminary, any inferences to be offered must be considered as tentative. Psychiatric patients should not be judged as a homogeneous group as far as their potential susceptibility to corrupting influences in the media. There is no foundation for generalizing in either direction whether or not the undesirable observational learning available to patients stimulates or provocates them. The same is true of normals. It is likely that television in itself is not the most potent determinant of subsequent behavior, but together with certain situational and personality variables television may be an influencing factor.

An empirical study by Bailyn (1959) demonstrated that though it was true that such sources as comics, motion pictures, and television might adversely affect children with certain dispositions and behavioral difficulties that this is a rare occurrence. This occurred with only 3% of her sample.

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On the other hand, it would be irresponsible to disregard research which, in effect, suggests that 'violence breeds more violence' but many such studies were flawed by experimental artifact. In a valuable review paper, Klapper (1968) lists a number of frequent shortcomings in this area of research. Among the more salient limitations are that:

> -the "aggression" consisted of hitting, kicking, and otherwise attacking a Bobo doll, which is a toy rather than a person. It is also to be noted that the toy was designed for this purpose, and virtually invites attack.
> -that the stimulus material for the experimental group consisted entirely, or very nearly entirely, of exhibitions of such attack by adults, outside of any context at all, and untempered by exhibitions of other activities, or by the presence of other adults in the exhibition.
> -that the early Bandura experiments included no "sanctions," i.e., no adult (or child) at any time during the experiment indicated that the "aggressive" behavior was in any way disapproved or might entail any unpleasant consequences.
> -that the children were placed for the criterion behavior period in a physical situation identical in every respect with the situation of the adult in the film.
> -that the so-called heightened aggression was observed very soon (a few minutes) after exposure to the stimulus material, and no attempt was made to determine the duration of the effect (Klapper, 1968, p. 135).

To date, research conducted on the effects of televised violence to older age groups has been sparse.

At this time, the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior investigating the extent to which televised violence has harmful effects on the public has begun to report its findings. The initial report has been sufficiently vague to stimulate a wide range of divergent interpretations (APA Monitor, 1972; New Republic, 1972).

The complexity of the issues raised by such investigations has been cited by earlier writers. Macoby (1968) stated that:

> When we ask about the effects of the mass media, we must not phrase the question in terms of whether the media have an effect, but rather how much effect on what kind of (people), and under what circumstances will the effects be exhibited (Macoby, 1968, p. 120).

In a brilliant critical review of the aggression literature Wrightsman (1973) concluded:

> Apparently, the nature of the viewer, the nature of the stimulus, and the nature of the situation interact in such ways that exposure to mass media may either facilitate or inhibit the (actual) expression of aggression (Wrightsman, 1973, p. 146).

An argument in need of empirical testing is that the portrayal of televised violence, as in news programs and documentaries, under certain conditions might have beneficial effects. Larsen (1968) has theorized that:

> ...violence can serve as a catalyst for social change as when alienated sectors of the population take recourse to violence and aggression to overcome blocks to social economic achievement (Larsen, 1968, p. 116).

Though substantial attention has been directed toward the question of whether or not violence should be permitted to appear on television, the issue of the context in which it might be least socially disruptive remains unresolved. In a non-empirical presentation, the Committee on Violence addressed itself to that topic:

> The media's message in depicting violence is that violence is a good, often quick way to get things done; violence is billed as effective coping...Violence is condoned, rewarded, and even glorified. Ironically the viewer usually is deprived of the one aspect of violence that might discourage violence. The censor cuts out the ugly consequences, the victim's pain and agony and the wanton destruction of life. This restricts the viewer from determining the coping value of violent acts, since the full impact and range of consequences are not presented for appraisal. Furthermore, we are never taught "in this school for violence that violence in itself is something reprehensible" (Daniels and Gilula, 1970, p. 434).

One might surmise that just as education for the masses has created serious problems (Glasser, 1967; Goodman, 1970), so the same has happened with the advent of large doses of televised violence for all. Neither source of learning is likely to be disallowed because of its shortcomings and inadequacies. As the present study demonstrated, since no consistent patterns of actual aggression emerged for either the High or Low television-aggression groups, more subtle factors and interactions among independent variables are probably operative. In view of previous research showing poor premorbid patients as more perseverative and less capable of making situational discriminations (e.g., fantasy or fiction vs. reality), more careful labeling might be in order for television programs. The Orson Welles' War of the Worlds radio broadcast is only one example of a deleterious reaction to a mislabeled product of the media. The serious organic impairment that can result from a blow on the head is another example of television created distortions of reality that might be reduced through proper labeling.

TABLE 1

Summary of Television Programs According

to Aggressive Content Ratings

Low (1 point)	Moderate (2 points)	High (3 points)
Advocates	Adam 12	Basketball
Allan Watts	Baseball	Boxing
All in the Family	Bat Masterson	Bugs Bunny
American Bandstand	Bold Ones	Cartoons
Andy Williams	Bonanza	Chiller (Horror Movies)
Animal Kingdom	Burke's Law	Dan August
Barbara McNair	Dragnet	Felony Squad
Bell Telephone Hour	FBI	Football
Ben Casey	Fugitive	Friday Night (Horror Movies)
Beverly Hillbillies	Get Smart	Dan August
Bewitched	Gunsmoke	Felony Squad
Bill Cosby	Harlem Globetrotter's Cartoon	Football
Bob Hope	High Chapparal	Friday Night (Horror Movies)
Boss City	Highway Patrol	Hawaii Five-O
Brady Bunch	Huckleberry Hound	I Spy
Candid Camera	Ironside	Mannix
Captain Kangaroo	It Takes a Thief	Mission Impossible
Carol Burnett	Men from Shiloh	Name of the Game
Church programs	Mod Squad	News
Concentration	Outer Limits	NYPD
Courtship of Eddie's Father	Rifleman	Roadrunner
Dating Game	San Francisco International Airport	Roller Derby
David Frost	Sea Hunt	Superman Cartoon
Dean Martin	Star Trek	Tom and Jerry Cartoons
Defenders	Suspense Theater	Wrestling
Dennis the Menace	Today	
Dick Cavett	Wide World of Sports	
Dick Van Dyke	Wyatt Earp	
Dinah Shore		
Dr. Kildare		
East Side/West Side		
Ed Sullivan		
Election Returns		
Family Affair		
Father Knows Best		
First Tuesday		
Flip Wilson		
Galloping Gourmet		
Gilligan's Island		
Glen Campbell		
Golf		
Gomer Pyle		

TABLE 1 (continued)

Green Acres
Hee Haw
Hogan's Heroes
Hollywood Palace
Hollywood Squares
I Love Lucy
I've Got a Secret
Jackie Gleason
Jacques Cousteau
Jeopardy
Johnny Cash
Julia Child
Laugh In
Lawrence Welk
Let's Make a Deal
Like Young (Rock Music)
Love American Style
Love of Life
Mary Tyler Moore
Medical Center
Men at Law
Merv Griffin
Mike Douglas
Monkees
Mormon Tabernacle Choir
Mr. Ed
Munsters
My Three Sons
My World and Welcome To It
NET Playhouse
Newlywed Game
Partridge Family
Playboy After Dark
Psychiatrist
Ralph Story (Local news stories)
Red Skelton
Sargeant Bilko
Secret Storm
Smothers Brothers
Steve Allen
That Girl
Tom Jones
Tonight Show
Truth or Consequences
Walt Disney
What's My Line
Who, What, Where Game
World Tomorrow

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TABLE 2

Group Correlations Showing Relationship Between High Zap Behavior and High Aggressive Content Television Viewing

	Zaps		Television		
Group	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	r
Total (N = 114)	4.21	3.39	17.41	3.54	-.19*
Patients (N = 76	4.84	3.50	17.45	3.79	-.17
Normals	2.95	2.79	17.34	3.04	-.31
Goods (N = 41)	4.61	3.54	17.10	3.95	-.03
Poors (N = 35)	5.14	3.48	17.86	3.60	-.38*
College Patients (N = 38)	3.66	3.17	17.55	4.14	-.18
Non-College Patients (N = 38)	6.03	3.44	17.34	3.44	-.17

*$p < .05$

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TABLE 3

A Comparison of High (6+) and Low (<3) Zap Groups

Among All S's on the Television Variable

Group	N	Mean TV Score	Std. Dev.	t
Low Zap	45	18.07	3.97	2.16**
High Zap	41	16.44	2.87	

**$p < .025$

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TABLE 4

A Comparison of High ($\geq$6) and Low ($\leq$3) Zap Groups

Among College S's on the Television Variable

Group	N	Mean TV Score	Std. Dev.	t
Low Zap	35	18.09	4.01	2.06***
High Zap	18	16.00	2.06	

***$p < .025$

FOOTNOTES

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